

# FINAL REPORT

## COMMISSION ON SCHOOL UTILIZATION

*March 6, 2013*



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## Executive Summary

The Commission on School Utilization was charged by Chicago Public Schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett with advising on how to consolidate a District that has, according to its own formula, far more seats than students. After four months of work, the Commission has concluded, first, that **closing schools and moving students – indeed that any school action – are only justifiable if, as a result, students are moved into better educational environments. Second, that CPS has a responsibility to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, the safety of students who are being moved.**

Against these two standards, we believe that CPS has the capacity to consolidate approximately **80** schools.

Next, we offer advice on implementation. We believe the District has only two practical options: (1) close all of the schools it can justify in one year, thus minimizing the distractions and concomitant academic stagnation that follow announcement of school actions; or (2) close some schools in the first year, again to minimize distractions and learning stagnation, but give other schools that require extra logistical support or are otherwise more complicated time to develop further plans. We examined other possibilities, such as spreading closures out over five years, but found the distraction to the District and impact on students who would live under the cloud of potential closures too damaging to recommend.

In deciding which of these two paths to take, we are heartened by the new leadership CPS has attracted, but caution that hundreds of staff will need to work in concert for consolidations to be successful. We believe the District has the physical space and the capacity to accommodate approximately **80** consolidations, including closures and other school actions such as turnarounds and co-locations.

When we started our work last November, we were given a list of **330** schools that were, according to CPS's utilization formula, classified as underutilized. In the first phase of our work we listened to parents, families, students, teachers, administrators, and elected officials across the city, and also learned from education experts, including academics, CPS officials, and Chicago Teachers Union leaders.

We learned that while the mathematics of CPS's utilization formula seems sound, the math alone reflects neither the reality of what people experience in their schools nor the specific needs of different schools and communities. We learned that the utilization formula is best

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used as a way to prioritize where conversations about utilization and potential consolidations should start, rather than as the sole factor in deciding which schools should close.

We also learned that the most dramatically underutilized schools suffer the most academically, with more split-level classrooms and more classrooms that are severely overcrowded than either efficiently utilized or overcrowded schools.

We learned that closing schools can have significant, adverse effects on both students and communities, and that in past closures too many CPS students were moved to poorly performing schools, where their academic performance remained stagnant. On the other hand, we learned that those who moved to better-performing schools did better academically.

As a result, in our Interim Report at the end of Phase I we made nine recommendations that amounted to what we were sure CPS should **not** do as it works to consolidate the District.

CPS accepted our recommendations, added additional guardrails based on what it heard through early February at community meetings around the city, and applied them to its initial list of **330** underutilized schools. In mid-February, based on our recommendations and its additional criteria, CPS released a list of **129** schools that remain candidates for closure.

Meanwhile, over the past two months, we met with those who work at the neighborhood level, including Community Action Councils and the Local School Council Advisory Board. We also met with students and continued to learn from education experts, who provided input through our website and in writing. We interviewed school districts from around the country to understand the lessons others have learned in closing schools, we attended CPS-led neighborhood meetings, and we studied in more depth CPS data on school footprints and enrollments. Our goals were to understand (1) how specific school uses would change application of the utilization formula; (2) the potential for moving students to better-performing schools; and (3) the requirements for, and the capacity of, CPS to transition large numbers of students.

## FINDINGS

Regarding the utilization formula, we conclude most importantly that it should never be used exclusively to decide which schools should be shuttered. Rather, it should be used as a starting point to decide where to look further. We found that factors such as annex space, students with disabilities and their needs, pre-Kindergarten classrooms, community-based health centers, and Head Start placements were critical to understanding how a school is used, and what its

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utilization rate should be. Most importantly, knowing the details of how a school is used and the needs of its students are critical for deciding what action, if any, to take.

Regarding the potential to move students to better-performing schools, the number of schools CPS might consolidate is limited primarily by the number of higher-performing seats available and the distance between schools. We found that CPS has capacity in better-performing schools to **accommodate approximately 80 consolidations, including closures and other school actions such as turnarounds and co-locations**. As with the utilization formula, deciding which schools to close and where to send students requires close examination on a school-by-school and neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis to understand if actions can be taken safely and if basic needs – e.g., accessibility for students with disabilities – can be accommodated.

Regarding how to move students safely and effectively, other districts gave us a long list of lessons from which CPS can learn. Moving students safely and effectively is neither easy nor inexpensive, but it can be done. We are heartened by the new leadership CEO Byrd-Bennett has in place and the new organizational structure that has been set up within CPS to focus on closing schools and moving students safely.

We have confidence that CPS is better prepared to close schools this year than it has been in the past. But new leadership and structure are not sufficient on their own to ensure effective execution. Hundreds of staff will also need to be trained to work in concert, and to the extent that CPS considers other types of school actions, the capacity of the District to consolidate effectively will be further limited.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our work in Phase II, and building upon the guidance we offered in Phase I, we offer five additional recommendations:

1. **Only close schools where students can be transferred safely to better-performing schools.** Our analysis suggests that CPS has the capacity to consolidate approximately 80 schools.
2. **Look beyond the utilization data to examine in detail all relevant factors** (e.g., annex space, students with disabilities and their needs, pre-Kindergarten classrooms, Head Start placements) when considering whether to close a school. In particular, pay close attention to the work done by communities. Wherever thoughtful community plans have been developed and vetted – for example, in Woodlawn,

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Humboldt Park, Englewood, Bronzeville, and a number of other communities around the city – those plans should weigh heavily in any decisions.

3. **Consider two options on pacing: all in one year or split over two years.** As soon as possible, CPS must lift the cloud of potential closures and get back to the work of investing in schools, curriculum, instruction, and students.
4. **Spend the money to do it right,** so that students are moved safely and as effectively as possible into better schools and so that receiving schools have the infrastructure they need for all students to succeed.
5. **Create community-based building committees to develop plans for vacated school buildings** so that the facilities remain community assets rather than become eyesores, or worse.

We recognize that closing schools can be a disruptive and dispiriting process and has not, in the past, led to greater educational opportunities for children. At the same time, consolidation has the potential to improve the education of tens of thousands of Chicago youth. Moving children safely to better schools is the outcome toward which we hope our work will guide the District. Indeed, it is the only outcome that matters.

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## I. Introduction

Chicago's public schools are, according to calculations done by the District, severely underutilized. Chicago Public Schools officials estimate that the system has an excess capacity of approximately 100,000 seats. Several factors contribute to the excess capacity, including a significant decrease in the number of young people who call Chicago home, a mismatch between school openings and school closings, and District enrollment policies.

Underutilization is a problem that carries heavy academic, maintenance, and organizational costs, which are borne by students, schools, and the District as a whole. That's why dealing with underutilization is necessary. But doing so is neither easy nor painless.

The Commission on School Utilization, made up of eight concerned citizens from around Chicago, was created by CPS CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett to listen to communities, learn about the issues surrounding utilization, and offer the District guidelines on how it should approach underutilization and school consolidation.

The Commission began its first phase of work in November by engaging broadly with communities around Chicago. We held six public community meetings in various areas of the city where we heard from parents, families, students, teachers, administrators, elected officials, and other community members. In addition, we held four data-gathering sessions, also open to the public, where we asked academics, researchers, CPS staff, and Chicago Teachers Union officials to offer testimony on the issues surrounding consolidation. And we heard from the public by email and through a feedback form on our website, [www.schoolutilization.com](http://www.schoolutilization.com).

Through that engagement, we learned that while the mathematics of the formula CPS uses to calculate utilization rates is sound, the math does not reflect the reality of what people experience in their schools, nor, in many cases, the specific needs of different schools and communities.

Having said that, it became clear that the District does, in fact, have a problem of underutilization. While the problem likely started many years ago, underutilization is a growing issue. And underutilization imposes steep costs that are borne by students, schools, and the District.

Academically, underutilized schools experience a higher likelihood of split-grade classrooms and, paradoxically, severely overcrowded classrooms than fully utilized schools.

Underutilization also makes it harder to provide students with art, music, and physical

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education instruction. And school staff have fewer peers with whom to build effective networks of collaboration than in fully-utilized schools.

Underutilization multiplies maintenance costs, forcing the District to invest in the operations and upkeep of multiple, inefficiently-used buildings. And it makes it harder for the District to invest in infrastructure like libraries, playgrounds, and air conditioning for all of its students, as investments must be spread more thinly across the District.

Finally, underutilization imposes organizational costs at the schools. Principals are deprived of the flexibility to assign staff and create specialized learning environments that their counterparts in more efficiently used schools are allowed. And community partners find fewer opportunities to partner with underutilized schools, which often lack the capacity to attract and engage with outside partners, or utilize partners' contributions effectively.

We know that closing schools is difficult, and heard from many about the significant, adverse effects school closings have had in the past on both students and communities. The tremendous distrust of CPS in Chicago's communities only makes the process more difficult.

Given the problems that accompany underutilization, and the difficulties of closing schools, Phase I ended with our issuing an interim report with nine initial recommendations:

1. Take high schools off the table
2. Don't close any Level 1 (high-performing) schools
3. Don't close underutilized schools that are in the process of adding grades
4. Don't close or consolidate underutilized schools with more than 600 students
5. Don't close underutilized schools that are close to efficient utilization
6. Don't close underutilized schools that have recently experienced a significant school action
7. Don't close underutilized Level 2 schools that are "on the rise"
8. Develop creative solutions to deal with the 61 elementary schools that are overcrowded
9. Hold charter-operated schools to the same standards to which District-run schools are held

These recommendations, in essence, told CPS what we believe it should not do. We built on that work in Phase II by continuing to meet with a variety of stakeholders, including Community Action Councils (CACs) and the Local School Council Advisory Board (LSCAB), and several additional experts, including demographers and those who have been part of school closings around the country.

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We also studied more closely a number of the issues that were raised in Phase I. We started by looking carefully at the utilization formula, and worked to understand how factors such as annex space, classrooms for students with disabilities, pre-Kindergarten classrooms, school-based health centers, projected growth of neighborhoods, and Head Start placements affect utilization. We also looked at room-by-room usage surveys sent to every principal in the system, to confirm that CPS's utilization calculations were accurate.

Given the need to move students safely from closed schools into better-performing schools, we looked at how many high-quality seats would be accessible to students from schools that might be consolidated.

We looked at what resources are necessary to support students, their families, school staff, and communities affected by consolidation, and we considered the costs associated with providing these supports. We debated the rate at which CPS might close schools and, finally, we looked at what might be done with shuttered buildings.

The remainder of this report describes what we found and what, as a result, we recommend.

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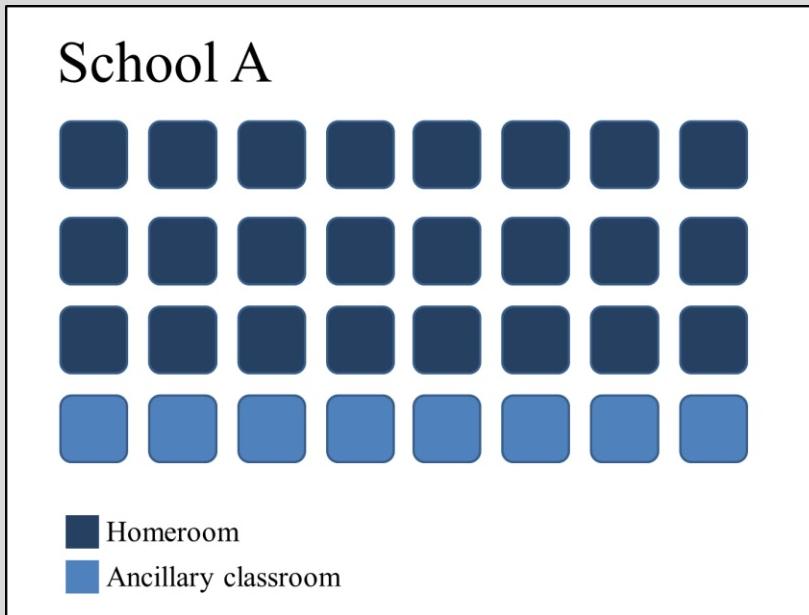
## II. Utilization Formula

CPS uses a formula to classify schools into one of three categories – underutilized, efficient, and overcrowded. The formula is not a tool that should be used exclusively to make decisions about any actions concerning a school. Rather, it is a useful way to quickly identify where CPS needs to look closer.

### UTILIZATION AT A SAMPLE SCHOOL

CPS's utilization calculation is intended to help the District understand which schools *may* be underutilized, and thus deserve a second look. Here's how it works:

School A has 32 total classrooms. CPS assumes that roughly 76 percent of an elementary school's total classrooms are being used as "homerooms" holding, on average, 30 students each. So 24 of School A's 32 classrooms are considered homerooms.



School A's ideal utilization, calculated by multiplying those 24 classrooms x 30 students/classroom, is 720 students. If School A falls below 80 percent of that ideal utilization, or 576 students, it would be considered underutilized. If School A's enrollment rises above 120 percent of that ideal utilization, or 864 students, it would be considered overcrowded.

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The formula itself starts by counting the total number of classrooms in a school. Just over three-quarters (76%) of the classrooms in an elementary school are classified as “homerooms,” each of which is expected to hold 30 students. The remainder of the classrooms is set aside for special use, including art, music, science, and special education, whether pull-out or self-contained. So the total number of classrooms  $\times$  76 percent  $\times$  30 students equals 100 percent, or ideal, utilization, according to CPS’s formula. Schools with less than 80 percent utilization are classified underutilized, those between 80 and 120 percent utilization are classified efficient, and those above 120 percent utilization are classified overcrowded.<sup>i</sup>

In listening to community members during Phase I, we heard many times over about the nuances that the utilization formula fails to capture, including how annex space affects a school’s utilization status, the space needed to house full-day pre-Kindergarten, how Head Start would be accommodated once utilization decisions are finalized, and the space needed for special education classrooms, which by state mandate have a lower student-teacher ratio than general education homerooms. The utilization formula also doesn’t capture whether a school is a community anchor, whether it houses a school-based health center that is a crucial resource for the entire population of the area, how a neighborhood’s demographics are changing and whether closing a school in an area that is growing might lead to overcrowding in the future, or other uses that aren’t easily categorized by the math.

In Phase II, we invested considerable time understanding the formula and how different factors change the utilization rate.

## ANNEXES AND MOBILE CLASSROOMS

**Removing annex space from the utilization calculations could change the utilization status for some schools, but doesn’t change appreciably the overall picture of underutilization.**

Annexes are permanent buildings with a fixed foundation and permanently attached walls, roofs and floors, and cannot be moved. Annex space is used in calculating utilization. Mobile units – temporary classrooms without a foundation – are not considered permanent buildings, and are therefore not counted in calculating utilization.

Across the District, CPS has 39 elementary schools with annex buildings, 18 of which are in schools that are on the list of 129 schools CPS released in mid-February that are still under consideration for closure. Of those 18, 1 annex could not be shuttered because doing so would cause the school to become overcrowded.

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In 13 of the remaining 17 schools, utilization would remain below 70% even after removing the annex space from the calculation. In 4 schools, removing the annex space would increase utilization above the 70% threshold the Commission suggested in Phase I. In those 4 cases, we encourage CPS to consider whether closing or tearing down an annex, rather than closing a school, might make the most sense.<sup>ii</sup>

**Demolishing certain annexes, while expensive in the short-term, could save money long-term and has the potential to revitalize both the school community and the neighborhood at large.**

Most annexes, built in the 1970s to relieve overcrowding, are aesthetically displeasing and costly to maintain. In fact, the cost to maintain and upgrade many of these annexes over the next 5-10 years averages \$4 million per annex, likely exceeding 80 percent of the replacement value of the annex buildings. Thus, shuttering an annex, if a school's enrollment allows, could save CPS significant funds.<sup>iii</sup>

The least expensive approach to shuttering an annex would be to decommission the building and spend approximately \$75,000 per year to secure the annex and ensure basic operations, such as heat to keep pipes from bursting.<sup>iv</sup> While not prohibitively expensive, maintaining decommissioned spaces poses potential safety risks.

Tearing down an annex, on the other hand, can be costly. CPS estimates that the cost of demolishing an annex and replacing it with fields and parking lots would range from \$3.5 million to \$6 million per site.<sup>v</sup> However, were CPS to demolish an annex structure and install a new turf field, playground, or parking lot and exterior lighting, the work could improve both the school and the neighborhood. In doing so, the District might not only provide open space for students and the surrounding community, but also ease transportation challenges faced by teachers, parents, and caretakers.

*Where closing annexes makes sense academically, we encourage CPS to consider seeking capital funds for demolition and site improvements, rather than just shuttering and securing abandoned structures.*

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## PRE-KINDERGARTEN

**Accurately accounting for the space used by full-day pre-Kindergarten would not change the utilization category of any of the 129 elementary schools still under consideration for closure. However, given the importance of full-day pre-K, we recommend that CPS alter its formula to encourage, rather than inadvertently discourage, full-day pre-K.**

Pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) students are counted in the utilization formula using the same average classroom size (30) as is assumed for other classes. As enrollment is limited to 15 students in pre-K classrooms in CPS, a school that offers half-day pre-K would show, on average, 30 students (two classes of 15) in each Pre-K classroom over the course of a day, and the presence of pre-K would not impact the utilization rate negatively.

However, where schools offer full-day pre-K, the utilization formula would suggest that a room is only half-utilized (15 students over the course of the day) and the school would, in essence, be penalized for providing a richer educational experience.

Among the schools on CPS's list of 129 that are still under consideration for closure, 10 offer full-day Pre-K. Although the utilization rates of those schools went up when space for full-day pre-K was properly accounted for, the rate did not rise above 70 percent at any of the 10.

But while the formula is meant to identify which schools deserve a closer look, rather than to cover every use of every room in a school building, *we believe that full-day pre-K is so important that we suggest CPS modify the formula so that it encourages full-day pre-K, rather than inadvertently discouraging the transition from half-day to full-day pre-K.*

## HEAD START

### **Revisit Head Start placements after closure decisions are made.**

Head Start slots are allocated based on need. As CPS examines potential actions in a neighborhood, we recommend that the District ensure that every community retains enough space in remaining schools to accommodate all Head Start-eligible children. CPS will need to work closely with the Chicago Department of Family & Support Services to plan for that contingency.

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## SPECIAL EDUCATION

**Properly inventorying the space used by special education classrooms could change the utilization status of an indeterminate number of schools. Because the needs of students vary widely, we strongly encourage CPS to look closely at the requirements of students who might be moved and the capacity of receiving schools to accommodate those needs, including Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility requirements, before any consolidations are recommended.**

Illinois schools are required by law to provide a full continuum of supports for students with disabilities in the least restricted environment (LRE) possible. In CPS, students receive services, as defined in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in one of three different settings: his or her neighborhood CPS school; in a neighborhood school serving students city-wide; or in a specialized, separate school (Exhibit 1).

### EXHIBIT 1: THE SPECIAL EDUCATION CONTINUUM IN CPS

#### Service is provided...

In the student's neighborhood school

In a neighborhood school serving students city-wide

In a specialized, separate school

##### **LRE 1:**

Student spends 0–20% of time in a separate classroom

##### **LRE 2:**

Student spends 21–60% of time in a separate classroom

##### **LRE 3:**

Student spends 61% or more of time in a separate classroom

##### **Cluster Programs**

Specialized classrooms in schools throughout the city

##### **Non-District Day Schools**

##### **Non-District Residential Schools**

##### **CPS Specialty Schools**

Student placements are decided along the LRE continuum at the district level

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Approximately 31,000 elementary school students with disabilities, 11% of the total student population, receive services in their neighborhood CPS school. Within the 129 schools still under consideration for closure, the percentages are similar: Approximately 5,200 students with disabilities, 12% of the total student population, receive services within those 129 schools. These students are further categorized by the level of services needed. LRE 1 includes students served in the general education classroom full time with supplementary aids and services, including special education teacher support through consultation or co-teaching. LRE 1 also includes students who are removed from the general education classroom up to 20% of their school day to receive specialized services. LRE 2 students are removed from the general education classroom between 21% and 60% of their school day, and LRE 3 includes students who are removed from the general education classroom from 61% to 100% of the day. LRE 3 students might have specific integrated activities, such as homeroom, art, gym, music, computers, lunch, field trips, and assemblies.<sup>vi</sup>

When a student needs more specialized support than can be offered at his or her neighborhood school, often he or she is served in a cluster program. Cluster programs serve students with specific needs (e.g., blind, deaf, and those with autism) in specialized classrooms in neighborhood schools throughout the city. Several hundred cluster programs exist across the city, serving 5,125 elementary school students, 2% of the total student population.<sup>vii</sup> Within the 129 school still under consideration for closure, 1,240 students, or 3% of the total student population, are served in cluster programs.

When a student needs even more specialized support, he or she attends a separate school that is fully dedicated to serving students with disabilities. Approximately 3,400 elementary school students attend separate schools, either non-District day or residential schools or CPS specialty schools.<sup>viii</sup>

Regarding utilization, ideal capacity for specialized schools is calculated using 13 students, rather than 30, per homeroom. Every school that is still under consideration serves at least some students with disabilities, and many schools have large populations of students with disabilities. For the purposes of calculating utilization at neighborhood schools and in cluster programs across the city, CPS does not count special education rooms as homerooms, nor does it account specifically for the differing sizes of special education classrooms. Therefore, special education programming (self-contained classrooms within neighborhood schools as well as pull-out classrooms) must, by default, fit into the 24% of rooms that the utilization formula sets aside as ancillary classrooms.

According to the State of Illinois, the maximum number of students with IEPs who can be in one classroom can range from as few as 5 to as many as 17,<sup>ix</sup> depending on staffing and

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student needs. Given the large number of students needing specialized services and the complexity of accommodating every need appropriately, no simple formula will suffice. Rather, CPS should look closely at each school and the needs of all of its students – including those with physical disabilities who require ADA accommodations. And it will need to ensure that if a school were to be closed, the receiving school would be able to accommodate the needs of all of its students.

## SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH CENTERS

**School-based health centers (SBHCs) are important community assets that offer critical services to schools and communities. We encourage CPS to check carefully that affordable health services would still be available to students and families in the community if schools with SBHCs are closed.**

School-based health centers are facilities where students can be treated for acute illnesses, such as flu, and chronic conditions, including asthma and diabetes. Students can also be screened for dental, vision, and hearing problems. With an emphasis on prevention, early intervention, and risk reduction, school-based health centers counsel students on healthy habits and how to prevent injury, violence, and other threats, and constitute critical assets to a school and community.

CPS houses 29 SBHCs,<sup>x</sup> 3 of which are in schools that are on CPS's list of 129 still under consideration for closure. The District sets aside dedicated space for each school-based health center (i.e., the rooms in which the SBHC operates are not counted in the utilization formula), so the presence of an SBHC does not affect a school's utilization status. But it is possible that an underutilized school containing an SBHC might be closed, and in that case it will be important to ensure that students and families will still have access to affordable health care facilities nearby.

A closer analysis shows that for each of the 3 SBHCs in elementary schools still under consideration, there is an alternate, affordable health care center located within a half mile of the school-based health center. Thus, the presence of SBHCs, while important to consider, is not likely to pose a significant limitation on the number of schools that can be consolidated.

Thinking to the future, it will also be important for the District to consider the impact of the Affordable Care Act, and how that might affect the availability of health care for students. With the number of residents eligible for Medicaid likely to rise, it is possible that some clinics could see large increases in patient populations, and if so, access for students might be limited.

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To the extent possible, CPS should also consider the impact of ACA implementation on the availability of health services where schools with SBHCs are being considered for closure.

## **POPULATION PROJECTIONS**

**Before closing any school, anticipated changes in the population should be considered.**

The utilization formula is a snapshot, and doesn't account for demographic change over time. While the majority of underutilized schools are in neighborhoods where populations are decreasing, it will be important to look on a block-by-block basis, to identify potential changes that might alter the demographics of a school. In particular, we encourage CPS to work closely with the Chicago Housing Authority and the City of Chicago's Department of Housing and Economic Development to identify developments or other investments that might overwhelm what is currently a well-utilized school, or move an underutilized school into efficient status.

## **UTILIZATION AND USE**

**Principal surveys confirmed that many schools are used fully, but underutilized.**

To ensure it is correctly categorizing classrooms, CPS sent each principal a room-by-room inventory of his or her building, and required each principal to confirm or correct the inventory. It also provided principals a formal appeals process to correct any inaccuracies. As a result of that work, the District addressed 16 appeals, and made changes in the utilization numbers for 13 of the 16 schools, which changed the utilization status of 2 schools.

Looking carefully at the use of schools reinforced the notion that many schools are well used, but technically underutilized. By that, we mean large numbers of schools have more space than students, but use the additional space in their buildings for important educational and community activities.

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## III. Characteristics of Receiving Schools

After filtering for the various factors that could affect the utilization status of elementary schools, we found that many schools remained categorized as underutilized. As we have discussed previously, that excess capacity has costs, both academic and financial. CPS has suggested that consolidating schools is an important tool for reducing these negative effects of overcapacity. In examining the extent to which consolidation might provide a solution to underutilization, we started from our basic premise, that any school action is only justifiable if, as a result, students are moved safely into better educational environments.

According to research done by the Consortium for Chicago School Research (CCSR), the quality of the receiving schools is a critical determinant of students' subsequent success, or lack thereof.<sup>xi</sup> In past closings, CCSR found that displaced students who enrolled in low-achieving receiving schools did not realize significant academic gains after consolidation. Those who enrolled in high-achieving receiving schools, on the other hand, realized greater gains in both reading and math than those who transferred into low-achieving schools.

**Based on these findings, we recommend that CPS only close schools where students can be transferred safely to better-performing receiving schools.**

In previous rounds of school closings in Chicago, moving to higher-performing schools has been the exception rather than the norm. Of 18 CPS elementary schools closed between 2001 and 2006 for either low enrollment or low performance, CCSR found that too many of the 5,445 displaced students wound up attending other low-performing schools after their schools were shut down. Forty percent of displaced students enrolled in schools that were on probation, and 42 percent enrolled in receiving schools where the scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) were in the lowest quartile of the distribution of scores in the system. Only 6 percent of students moved to schools with high average achievement and high levels of student-teacher trust and teacher personal attention.<sup>xii</sup>

That pattern of relocation – where the majority of students from closed schools end up in low-performing receiving schools – is not acceptable in the current round of school closings. It is imperative that parents and caretakers of students whose schools are closing be given explicit and detailed information about higher-performing schools into which their children have the option to transfer. The goal must be to enroll all displaced students into higher-performing

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schools, and to invest in those receiving schools to maintain their capacity to serve all students, new and returning. Thus, capacity will be limited by the number of empty high-quality seats in the District. CPS guidelines for school actions define higher-performing in several ways: (1) the receiving school must be at least one level higher than the closing school for 2011-12 on CPS's performance policy; or (2) the receiving school must perform better than the closing school for 2011-12 on three of four metrics – percentage of points on the performance policy, composite meets or exceeds score on the Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT), Value Added reading, and Value Added math.

In addition to looking at the absolute capacity of higher-performing schools, we also limited the number of students who could be accommodated in any single receiving school to no more than half of the total combined student population, once the students had been transferred. The point we hope to emphasize is that we believe CPS should consider the effects that transitioning large numbers of students in may have on a receiving school, and minimize the negative impact.

Limiting the distance between the closing school and the receiving school to 1 mile, we found that CPS has the capacity to accommodate students from 60 closing schools. By extending that distance to 1.5 miles, the distance at which CPS typically provides busing, the capacity increases to accommodate students from 70 schools.

Past experience has shown that students and their families are willing to travel longer distances for an increase in the quality of education. CCSR found that the 6 percent of students within its study sample who moved to higher-performing schools traveled on average 3.5 miles to attend those schools.<sup>xiii</sup> At the same time, for some children, 1 mile will be too far to travel given physical obstacles, gang lines, and other barriers.

CPS should not assume that all families will be able to travel any specific distance, and will need to consider possible distance on a school-by-school basis.

**Based on our count of available high-performing seats, and remaining cognizant of the many variables that can impact the District's capacity for actions, we believe that CPS has the capacity to carry out approximately 80 consolidations, including closures and other school actions such as turnarounds and co-locations.**

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We strongly recommend that the District work closely with the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) through the spring and summer to alter bus routes, add additional stops along existing routes, or add additional service to make those moves possible. In situations where those steps aren't feasible or aren't enough to make transportation relatively easy, CPS may need to provide direct transportation to students.

While we believe that the District has the capacity to carry out 80 consolidations, we don't intend for those numbers to be prescriptive. Before deciding which schools to close, many other factors – such as ADA compliance, local gang lines, the availability of Head Start and pre-K space, and so on, as described in the previous section – must be considered. CPS's capacity to close schools will be limited by other types of school actions that it takes on simultaneously. We'll discuss this in greater detail in the next section. As with the utilization formula, this is just a starting point.

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## IV. Requisite Supports for Schools

In past rounds of school closings, CPS has not always provided the supports needed to ensure students are moved safely into better schools. To meet the goal of moving all students safely into better schools, we believe the District must learn from past mistakes.

We looked at CPS's own history, consolidation outcomes from other cities, and research done by a number of foundations to compile a list of best practices around school consolidation. Based on our research, we believe significant supports are needed for five categories of stakeholders: students, families, school staff, the surrounding community, and the central office.

### **FOR STUDENTS**

CPS's first priority in closing schools must be to ensure students are moved safely into their new schools, and provided the supports to ensure that the students thrive academically. Those efforts will have to begin well before the start of the 2013-14 school year.

*March – June 2013*

Transportation can be a significant challenge for students whose local school is closed. Children who had been accustomed to walking to school must learn to navigate new, in many cases longer, routes, and in some cases public or private transit, to get to their new receiving schools. We believe CPS will need to begin working to address transportation challenges as soon as it announces its expected list of school closures.

The key to any transportation plan is student safety. We encourage CPS to develop a comprehensive safety plan that starts with mapping safe passage routes for students in coordination with the Chicago Police Department and community and neighborhood organizations. That includes identifying spots where it is necessary to have traffic aides or an additional police patrol presence to ensure student safety.

We also encourage the District to work with the CTA to map various transit options and routes for students changing schools, and work to create options where none exist. This could include altering existing bus lines to accommodate large blocks of students, adding additional stops on existing bus lines, or adding to the frequency of certain buses. In cases where using transit is too cumbersome or students are too young to navigate the CTA, CPS will need to create plans to provide transportation directly to students.

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We also encourage CPS to ensure that its outline of a transportation plan addresses any additional challenges faced by students with a variety of special needs. For those students who can't travel by public transportation, CPS will need to consider providing alternate transportation.

Transitions can be particularly difficult for students with disabilities. We encourage CPS to help those students prepare by providing each of them with a personalized "social story" that details the upcoming move.

CPS must also take care to ensure that the needs of transitioning English Language Learners (ELLs) are met. It should provide transition materials to families in multiple languages, and make sure that those families have the information to make informed decisions for their children.

*June – August 2013*

In past rounds of school closings, CCSR found that haphazard transitions cost students the opportunity for summer academic enrichment. According to the research, students from closing schools were less likely to enroll in Summer Bridge. A number of receiving schools told CCSR that they had to wait several months to obtain academic records for incoming displaced students, further hindering the academic progress of the students who were moved.

To ensure that students who need Summer Bridge don't miss out on the program, we recommend that CPS provide teachers at closing schools with specific information on nearby locations for summer programs, and ensure that students choose and enroll in one of them.

To ensure further that displaced students don't fall through the cracks, we encourage CPS to help each receiving school hold a one-week "summer camp" for incoming students. Receiving schools would need incoming students' records by the start of the camp, ensuring that records are transferred well before the start of the 2013-14 school year. The camp would give receiving schools an opportunity to assign students to academic tutors who will work with the students through the start of the school year to ensure that academic issues are addressed promptly. Students could also receive vision checks and health screenings, while receiving schools could confirm that incoming students' vaccination records are up to date. To ensure that incoming students do not feel stigmatized, CPS should consider encouraging returning students, too, to attend the camps, and it should offer programming that would allow new and returning students to mingle.

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Where possible, the camps should take place at the receiving schools themselves. This would allow school leaders to introduce students to the facility, helping to ease the transition at the start of the academic year. Where that's not possible – for example, where receiving schools are undergoing construction and capital improvements to accommodate additional students and improve their educational environments – we encourage CPS to secure alternate facilities nearby, such as Chicago Park District sites and local community centers.

Organizing many dozens of summer camps is an enormous undertaking, and it is an effort that must draw upon a large reservoir of outside support. We would encourage the Mayor's Office to consider convening stakeholders from around Chicago, including leaders in the business, non-profit, and foundation world, and secure their help, both financial and in-kind, to host these summer camps. **All Chicagoans have a vested interest in ensuring that the students who are displaced this coming year move successfully and safely into new and better schools. Now is the time to call for everyone to do their part. Indeed, it is hard to imagine closures on a large scale will be successful if all sectors – government, business, non-profit, and philanthropic – do not work together.**

We also encourage the District to provide additional opportunities for students with special needs – including those with IEPs and ELLs – to familiarize themselves with their receiving schools. In addition to the camps, then, CPS will need to schedule additional “meet-and-greets” at the receiving school for students with special needs, giving them and their families additional opportunities for face time with receiving teachers.

By early August, the District should ensure that each student with special needs has detailed instructions about the logistics at the school, including, for example, information on which building entrances are accessible, and step-by-step information on how to find the student's assigned classroom. For some students with IEPs, transitions are particularly difficult, and the District should work to minimize, as much as possible, confusion surrounding the first day of school.

*August – October 2013*

Traffic aides and police patrols will need to be in place along the routes from consolidated schools to receiving schools to ensure students are able to travel to and from school safely. We encourage CPS to ensure that each student receives printed information reinforcing designated safe passage corridors.

Schools will also need to track the arrival of late-enrolling students, those who missed the introductory summer camps, and ensure that their intake is handled smoothly. That includes

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assigning them each an academic tutor and ensuring they are placed into classrooms promptly. Students should not languish without class assignments.

Finally, we encourage CPS to provide receiving schools the resources necessary to plan assemblies and additional programming to build trust and foster integration between longtime students and incoming students. The District should also consider encouraging receiving schools to grow temporarily their student governments, including electing student council co-presidents, ensuring representation for students from consolidated schools.

## FOR FAMILIES

*April – June 2013*

CPS has a particular responsibility to ensure that all families understand the options their children have, how they can assess those options, and supports to make school closures as successful as possible for the entire family.

That work will need to start by creating transition teams at both closing and receiving schools, made up of families, teachers, and community members. These on-site teams will be able to identify any needs – informational, emotional, social – particular to their respective communities, and offer site-specific plans to meet those needs. For instance, a team at a closing school might work with its counterpart at the receiving school to create a display case in the receiving school’s hallway that would house memorabilia and pictures from the closing school.

Once CPS finalizes the list of school actions, it should hold assemblies at each closing school. The network chief, or another District employee, will explain enrollment options to families at these assemblies, and allow parents or other caretakers to both enroll their child at a receiving school and submit applications for selective enrollment, magnet, or out-of-area schools.

We also encourage CPS to follow up on the assemblies by distributing to all families at closing schools a booklet with comprehensive transition information, including details on designated receiving schools, a transportation plan, and a District-run parent hotline. This booklet should be published in all appropriate languages to ensure all families receive the information in a timely manner.

The District should take particular care to provide comprehensive information on the various transportation options available to students, including transit routes and resources, information

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on obtaining transit passes, and detailed information on safe passage routes. This is particularly important in cases where CPS is not providing transportation.

And we encourage the District to assign social workers to follow up with all families from closing schools who don't enroll their children at a receiving school by June 24, the final day of the current school year.

CPS will also need to provide families at the receiving schools information explaining what the inflow of students will mean for the school's culture and capabilities. This would include the expected growth in the size of the school, how this growth will affect classroom assignments, safety plans put in place to ensure a harmonious integration, and any planned construction or upgrades to the facility.

## *June – August 2013*

The first and last days of the summer camps held for transitioning students should include programming for families where school officials can address lingering questions and concerns. Parents or caretakers can also meet the academic tutor assigned to their children so that they can work with the tutor to ensure a successful integration for their children. For caretakers unable to attend these sessions, we encourage receiving schools to follow-up with an evening or weekend session that may be more convenient.

We also encourage the District to help facilitate informal picnics or meet-and-greet events at receiving schools, where families from the consolidated and the receiving school can mingle and get to know each other informally.

Finally, we strongly recommend that the District engage a moving company to transport all of the support equipment that students with special needs use to the receiving school, and invite families to familiarize themselves with the new set up. In past years, families have had to rent or borrow trucks and move this equipment by themselves.

## *August – October 2013*

Learning the ins and outs of a new school, its culture, and its expectations takes time. Receiving schools should schedule additional parent-teacher conferences at the start of the year for parents of transitioning students as a way to help speed the process of familiarization.

We also encourage CPS to consider temporarily growing LSCs at receiving schools by two spots for the 2013-14 school year to ensure some representation for parents or caretakers from

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consolidated schools. Doing so may require state legislation. If so, we encourage CPS to seek legislation allowing it to make this temporary change.

## FOR SCHOOL STAFF

*March – June 2013*

A loss of morale is inevitable at schools that are being consolidated, and we believe it is important that the District take special care to mitigate the effects on students. That includes hiring retired principals as support administrators to help principals of consolidated schools deal with logistics such as transferring student records and tallying school furniture, textbooks, and supplies.

We also encourage the District to give teachers at schools that are being consolidated clear information on who will be reassigned, how the reassignment will happen, and options and contingencies for teachers not guaranteed a teaching spot, or support staff who may not receive alternate job placement.

CPS should expect an increased need for substitute teachers at consolidating schools through the end of the current school year. Based on experience from past rounds of school closings, the District should plan for a 10 percent increase in teacher absence days and, where possible, assign temporary “building subs” to each school slated for closure.

Finally, we encourage the District to provide as much information as possible to staff at receiving schools about the number of additional students and teachers they can expect in the fall, and the additional supports they can expect over the summer and the beginning of the school year.

*June – August 2013*

The District will need to be cognizant of the needs of staff at the receiving school as well, who will both face logistical issues, and have concerns about how the integration of new students and teachers will affect the culture at their school.

For principals, we encourage CPS to set up a process by which the receiving school principal can work with the network chief to inventory materials and transfer in additional supplies and materials – including desks and textbooks – that will be needed in order to serve incoming students. We also recommend that CPS hire movers to move furniture and material into receiving schools.

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We encourage CPS to provide training time to integrate incoming teachers into the culture at the receiving school, engage in team building among all the staff, and foster collaboration. And we encourage the District to help principals at receiving schools create a clear process for two-way communication between the academic counselors assigned to incoming students and the teachers in the building to ensure that the two groups work in concert to keep students on track.

Finally, we strongly encourage CPS to prepare receiving schools, over the summer, to address the needs of special education students expected to transfer into their buildings.

The schools should set up any rooms that will be needed for students with special needs so that teachers are not left without proper equipment and space at the start of the school year. No teacher should be scrambling for appropriate space for students with specials needs.

Receiving schools will also need to conduct multiple types of staff training. They will need to train all workers in the building, including security guards, lunchroom workers, janitorial staff, building engineers, and groundskeepers, to appropriately and sensitively deal with the variety of special needs – physical, cognitive, and emotional – that students may have. Principals and staff will need additional guidance on how to schedule students with special needs appropriately so that incoming students with IEPs don't face extended unstructured time with nothing to do. And staff should be trained to operate any specialized equipment used in classrooms for students with special needs.

*August – September 2013*

If CPS addresses staff needs efficiently, it will have taken care of most needs before the school year begins. There are two things that CPS will have to do for staff at the start of the year. One, we encourage the District to provide additional staffing for as long as needed to address the additional transition needs of students with IEPs. And two, we encourage the District to place additional security guards at each receiving school for the first year to help alleviate any problems that may arise from integrating two student populations.

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## FOR THE COMMUNITY

*March – June 2013*

Community organizations, because of the on-the-ground knowledge of their streets and neighborhoods, can be a key asset in helping the District figure out safe passage routes for transitioned students to their new schools. We encourage CPS to create partnerships with community organizations and engage them as part of the solution in helping students transition safely into better schools.

The District should start by working with community organizations to identify community-based assets near both closing and receiving schools, and then reach out to those organizations that can provide support services or other resources to students and their families. It should also reach out to CACs and Local School Councils, network chiefs, branches of the Chicago Public Libraries, YMCA locations, and community youth centers, which, like schools, can serve as anchors in the community.

We also encourage the District to be transparent with communities about timelines for reaching resolutions about the disposition of empty school facilities.

*June – August 2013*

Community members, even those who don't have school-age children, are often strongly invested in their local schools. CPS will need to be mindful of the sense of loss that not just students, teachers, and families, but also community members, will feel when a neighborhood school is shuttered.

If a consolidated school housed community resources such as GED classes, parenting classes or a health center, we encourage the District to do outreach about how the consolidation will affect the community at large. Where possible, we encourage the District to work to relocate those programs into another nearby CPS facility. If relocation into a District facility is not possible, CPS should help identify and communicate alternate sources and locations for those resources.

*August – November 2013*

To do consolidation well, CPS will need to make community engagement an ongoing effort. As the school year begins, the District should check in with community partners on a weekly basis for the first month of the school year to learn from those on the ground about issues,

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including unexpected safety and transportation hurdles, that may be impeding students' successful transitions into new schools.

After that, we recommend that the District continue to learn from community partners, communicating with them on at least a monthly basis to ensure that it continues to be aware of additional issues, such as barriers to parental engagement, that may arise in the course of the school year.

## FOR THE CENTRAL OFFICE

*April – May 2013*

The work done by CPS's central office to ensure that consolidation proceeds smoothly should have started well before this spring. And in fact, the District has created a central command office to handle the planning for and implementation of school closings.

That team includes staff dedicated to such diverse and important pieces of work as public engagement; educating parents or caretakers of the options for transitioning their students; transfer of supports for students with special needs, early childhood education, and ELLs; support services for facilities, including transfer of equipment into receiving schools; internal transition operations; and securing talent so that transition work can be appropriately staffed.

While CPS has not done large-scale school closings in the past, the District does, in fact, facilitate the movement of large numbers of students from one school to another each summer, when it oversees the transition of roughly 25,000 8<sup>th</sup> graders into high school. That process includes providing information to 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students and families to help them decide in which high school they'll enroll, working to ensure student safety when traveling to and from school, and ensuring that records get transferred on time.

Transferring students after school consolidations is not the same as shepherding students from elementary school into high school, but both require an attention to detail and a high level of planning at the District office. So we are heartened by the centralized oversight CPS plans to keep over the school closing process. We recommend this central command office also includes personnel from the Chicago Police Department, the Chicago Transit Authority, the Chicago Housing Authority, the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, the Chicago Public Libraries, and the Mayor's Office. The transitions that occur this fall are everyone's responsibility, and the entire public sector needs to work together to support a successful implementation.

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We believe the District can do consolidations better this year than it has in years past, but it can't do better on its own. It will need to work closely with a number of other civic agencies in order to ensure that consolidations are handled well.

The District is also going to have to bring in a number of temporary staffers – including retired principals to support principals at closing schools and social workers to follow up and ensure that parents or caretakers enroll their students in receiving schools in a timely manner – to help oversee the logistics of transition. So the central command office will need to create a staffing policy to decide whether the hiring of supplementary staff will be handled by CPS or contracted out to an independent firm.

The District will need to create training materials for temporary staff, create a work plan for each department, and establish a clear chain of command and escalation procedures so that staffers are empowered to deal with problems in a timely manner. We encourage CPS to establish a troubleshooting team in the central office to ensure that relatively small problems don't become major bottlenecks to a successful transition. Because new staff may require background checks and other processing, the District's human resources department will need to set up a special hiring unit to expedite this process.

Once the list of proposed school closings is announced, we also encourage the District office to set up a call center to field parent inquiries and staff that center with ombudspersons for families and students.

All of this work will be in addition to the three meetings that CPS is statutorily required to hold at the site of each potential action during a 45-day comment period from mid-April through the end of May.

In addition to handling all of this logistical work, we encourage the central command office to incorporate facilities upgrades into its operations. CPS has long argued that having small numbers of students spread out across large numbers of schools not only leads to the duplicated operating costs of keeping two buildings heated and cleaned, but also makes it difficult for the District to invest in upgrades.

We think that makes sense. We agree with those who say that students deserve libraries, playgrounds, science labs, and art rooms, but understand that it is simply not financially feasible for the District to duplicate these investments across multiple underutilized schools.

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Consolidation will offer the District the opportunity to concentrate its investments. We encourage the District to draw up a priority list of investments, find a source of capital as quickly as possible, and begin soliciting bids to begin this important work.

## *June – August 2013*

By summer, the District will no longer need to employ some of the additional staff it will have hired in the spring. But the central command office will still need to hire the staff to run the “summer camps” at receiving schools, continue its work with the CTA and the Chicago Police Department to develop explicit, school-by-school plans for safe passage, and hire additional academic counselors at each of the receiving schools. It will also need to oversee movers to ensure that both special education equipment, and school furniture and books, are transported to the receiving schools in time for the start of the 2013-14 school year.

For the schools that are receiving capital upgrades, such as a new playground or a library, we encourage CPS to begin working with the Public Building Commission as soon as possible to ensure that the construction commences quickly, proceeds according to schedule, and is completed in time for the start of the school year. We also encourage the District to inventory needs and work on longer-range plans for making the necessary investments in the years to come.

## *August – October 2013*

We also recommend that the central command team check in weekly with principals for the first two months of the school year, so that it can help principals deal with issues or problems connected to transition that may surface through the beginning of the school year.

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## EXHIBIT 2: KEY CONSOLIDATION ACTIVITIES

	Spring 2013	Summer 2013	Fall 2013
<b>For Students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Work with CPD and CTA to create safe passage routes and transit options, including for students with special needs</li><li>• Provide personalized information to students with special needs</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hold "summer camps" at receiving schools</li><li>• Ensure students with special needs have additional meet-and-greets and detailed instructions about school logistics</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure intake of late-arriving students is handled smoothly</li></ul>
<b>For Parents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hold assemblies and distribute information booklets to parents at closing schools</li><li>• Provide information to parents at receiving schools</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allow parents to ask additional questions of school officials</li><li>• Facilitate informal picnics or meet-and-greet events at receiving schools</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Schedule additional parent-teacher conferences</li><li>• Ensure LSC representation of consolidated school parents at receiving schools</li></ul>
<b>For School Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide clear information on reassessments and alternative plans</li><li>• Prepare staff at receiving schools for additional students and teachers</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Integrate incoming teachers into new school culture</li><li>• Prepare receiving schools to address all needs of incoming students with special needs</li></ul>	
<b>For the Community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify assets and engage with community partners</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Work to relocate community resources currently housed in schools</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Maintain engagement with community partners</li></ul>
<b>For the Central Office</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Create training materials and workplans</li><li>• Establish clear chain of command</li><li>• Incorporate facilities upgrades into operations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Oversee safe passage, transportation, construction, and moving logistics</li><li>• Continue to inventory needs and work on long-range plan</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hire/reassign additional staff</li><li>• Check in weekly with principals</li></ul>

## COSTS OF SUPPORTS

Because we don't know which schools will be closed and which will become receiving schools, it is difficult to estimate the exact cost of the transition supports described in this chapter and the necessary capital improvements for receiving schools. Some of the capital upgrades, such as making buildings accessible for students with disabilities, will have to be done immediately. Others, such as updating playgrounds, adding libraries, and building science labs, we encourage CPS to make as soon as possible.

We know that providing these supports and making the needed capital investments will require significant investment at a time when CPS is struggling with a projected \$1 billion budget shortfall for the upcoming (2013-14) school year. Indeed, financial pressures are part of the reason school closures are being considered.

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Having said that, we also believe that consolidating underutilized schools will offer CPS an opportunity to improve the educations, and the educational environments, of a large number of students. Many people from around the city have argued that students deserve not just improved facilities – including adequate playgrounds, well-stocked and staffed libraries, and updated science labs – but also more varied programming, including art and music instruction.

We agree. But the District can't afford to make all of the needed capital improvements to all of its underutilized schools, especially when some schools need tens of millions of dollars of work. Nor can the District afford to place full-time, or even half-time, instructors for additional programming at schools that don't have enough students.

Consolidation will help CPS to concentrate its investments, so each dollar invested impacts the largest numbers of students.

We remain mindful of the District's financial straits. We nonetheless urge CPS to spend the money necessary to provide the supports that will ensure not only that students are moved safely into better schools but also that receiving schools receive the investments necessary to ensure all students are successful.

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## V. Pacing of School Closures

No matter how many schools are closed, **we believe CPS has two feasible options to pace the closures: If the District can assure the safety of students being moved, the process should commence this spring for all consolidations. Another option is to split the actions over two years.**

The issue of pacing is raised regularly by a variety of stakeholders – including communities, the CTU, newspapers, parents, families, academics, and others – who argue that CPS should delay closings for a year or more, using the extra time to do more planning and more community engagement.

In a perfect world, CPS would have a District-wide master plan that included a detailed look at necessary capital investments before it tried to take on school closures, and would indeed take time to plan every detail of a school action. The decision facing the District is whether to delay until there is more planning, or whether to get closures out of the way as quickly as can be done safely and then move forward.

### **ALL CLOSURES IN ONE YEAR**

**If the safety of the students being moved can be assured, we believe that completing the consolidations in one year offers the inherent advantage of minimizing the academic costs suffered by students enrolled in schools that are slated for closure, and removing the threat of closure from other District schools for an extended time frame.**

As CCSR’s research has shown, students’ reading and math achievement took the greatest hit not after transitioning to their new schools, but in the time between the announcement and the actual closure. “These announcements often caused significant angst for students, parents, teachers, and other community members, and the disruption may have hindered student learning,” CCSR’s report said.<sup>xiv</sup>

Completing closures and putting a five-year moratorium on closures in place, as CPS CEO Byrd-Bennett has promised, will offer communities peace of mind and an extended horizon of stability.

Equally important, closing schools as quickly as safely possible and implementing a moratorium will allow CPS to focus on the critical work that is necessary for our public education system to meet the needs of our children and our future. Closing schools is such a

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divisive issue that it is almost impossible for the District to focus on other, long-term work while trying to close schools. By completing the consolidation work, the District will be able to re-orient its resources away from the school closure process, and toward instructional and academic support.

Moving quickly also has risks. The quick turnaround may make community members feel that CPS's engagement with them was inauthentic and undertaken just for show. Moving fast could sow community discord and, because of the compressed time frame, cause confusion about why the District is making certain choices and not others. Most importantly, the compressed timeline may lead to the District making avoidable mistakes across the system, such as sending students to the wrong schools, failing to transfer students' IEPs, or not sufficiently preparing receiving schools for the influx of new students. That can include lacking desks and furniture, textbooks and other supplies, even the right teachers to teach the correct ages. These are not small risks, and we strongly encourage the District to ensure that, if it chooses to do all the closures in one year, it does so in a careful and thorough way.

## CLOSURES OVER TWO YEARS

**The academic costs imposed on students by the extended limbo make us reluctant to recommend stretching out closures over two years. It would only be a good option if CPS learns from mistakes this year, and improves school closing processes for the upcoming year.**

Those improved processes could be particularly useful in instances where a closure requires additional attention because of challenging logistics or other issues.

And the District would have time to do additional community outreach, including working with communities to draft a comprehensive consolidation plan for their neighborhoods.

A study done by the Broad Foundation says that the timeline for school closures should be at least 12 months long from the time of the first Board meeting discussing closure to the time that students are transitioned. Compressing the closure timeline – beginning with the initial discussion about the need to close schools and ending with student enrollment at receiving schools – to less than 12 months has led to more confusion, community discord, and other avoidable mistakes, according to the report. If all closures were implemented this fall, CPS would be attempting to compress that timeline into just under 10 months.

But there remain risks to extending the consolidation process over two years. The most damaging, as we stated above, is leaving students languishing in an environment with

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diminishing morale and a degraded learning environment. Stretching the time frame would also ensure a continued diversion of the District's resources to the issues of utilization and consolidation.

## CLOSURES OVER FIVE YEARS

### **We don't believe stretching closures out over five years is a viable option.**

On the surface, extending the time to close schools over 5 years appears to offer several advantages. For example, CPS would only have to close a small, relatively manageable number of schools each year, and could continually revise and refine its closure process, incorporating lessons learned in real time, and creating a thorough, well-tested template for future school closings.

The longer horizon would also, in theory, give the District additional time to deliver the message that consolidation is about improving the education that students receive. And as the District ramps up investment in remaining schools, the public might begin to see consolidation as a positive "right" sizing that results in fewer but significantly better schools and begin to buy in to the process.

Looking closely at the impact of closures on students and the District, however, it becomes apparent that extending closures out over more than one or two years poses significant challenges. Students enrolled in the schools slated for closure in years 3-5 would be left to languish in an environment from which many, including teachers, will have already disinvested. They'll suffer an extended decline in academic focus. Plus, the District would have to continue to divert too many of its resources, for too long, toward closing schools, rather than improving education.

Rather than expending its resources on a five-year school closure plan, CPS instead needs to shift its focus to core academic issues, ensuring that students achieve the maximum possible academic gains from the extended school day, and targeting its investments for libraries and enrichment activities to ensure that as many students as possible benefit.

Chicago's students and communities simply can't afford the extended uncertainty.

## VI. Use of Closed Facilities

### IN THE NEAR TERM

**We recommend that CPS create community-based building committees to develop plans for vacated schools buildings.**

During our Phase I community meetings and in conversations with CACs, many spoke to us about the risks of shuttering a school. A large, empty building can become a haven of illicit activity and pose an additional liability to a neighborhood already reeling from the recession. People talked equally passionately about the opportunities offered by creatively repurposing shuttered school buildings. Suggestions for reuse included turning the buildings into job-training facilities, call centers, fish farms, technology incubators, condominium projects, and senior housing. Using a shuttered school to house several non-profits that serve critical needs in a community was also suggested.

These and other ideas are appealing, and we hope some may come to fruition. We caution that implementing them will likely be difficult. Selling shuttered school properties is difficult even in a strong real estate market. Schools that are closed are often located in neighborhoods that are already suffering from population declines, and therefore can't support additional development without significant subsidies. Renovating and rehabilitating old buildings can also be expensive given the extensive structural, electrical, and plumbing upgrades that many of these buildings require. Indeed, it is the prohibitive cost of maintaining these facilities that is, in part, the reason CPS says it must close schools.

Recent experience illustrates the difficulty CPS will likely face: Between 2005 and 2012, CPS has sold, leased, or repurposed 17 of its properties. But at the end of 2012, the District still had 24 properties on the market.<sup>xv</sup>

The story is the same in much of the rest of the country. The Pew Charitable Trusts recently released a report examining the re-use of closed school buildings. The 12 cities, including Chicago, that Pew studied have collectively sold, transferred, or reused 267 properties since 2005, but 327 sites remain on the market.<sup>xvi</sup>

That is not to say creative re-use is impossible. Kansas City, for instance, launched its Repurposing Initiative in January 2011 after shuttering 29 school buildings in 2010. The effort was headed by a planner loaned to the District by the city's Planning and Development

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Department. One building is now being redeveloped into a mixed-income housing development.

In New York, P.S. 90 in Harlem was converted into a mix of market-rate and subsidized condominiums.<sup>xvii</sup> In Philadelphia, there are plans to convert the old West Philadelphia High School into market-rate apartments.<sup>xviii</sup> Collectively, the 12 cities studied in the Pew report have 26 projects converting old schools into new housing, 15 at market rate.<sup>xix</sup>

Housing is not the only potential re-use. Both Washington D.C. and Milwaukee have converted shuttered schools into police stations. Churches have acquired and repurposed old school buildings in a number of cities. Schools have also been turned into medical offices, office space, even a themed hotel in Portland, Ore.<sup>xx</sup>

Repurposing of this sort remains more the exception than the rule. And when buildings don't sell, districts must take extra care to secure buildings so thieves cannot strip them of plumbing and metal, and so they do not become a home base to criminals. In some cases, the best solution may be to find the funds to raze the building, recycle the building materials, and restore the site to green space. CPS might even consider salvaging and reselling the schools' vintage brick.

One of the more common reuses of shuttered schools around the country is to house charter schools. But CPS CEO Byrd-Bennett has promised that none of the schools the District closes due to underutilization will be repurposed as charter schools.

Given the difficulty of finding acceptable solutions for the reuse of shuttered schools, and the commitment CPS has made, we recommend that CPS work with the City of Chicago, community organizations, and neighbors to create a building committee tasked with developing plans for each school building that will be closed.

## IN THE LONG TERM

**We also recommend that CPS consider long-term needs and uses of buildings, and ensure that it retains the capacity to rebuild if neighborhoods repopulate several decades in the future.**

Working in collaboration with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, we found that there is a possibility that several neighborhoods that have been caught in a spiral of depopulation may repopulate over the next 20-30 years if sufficient and well-targeted city, state, and federal investments are made in infrastructure, land use, and public transportation.

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According to CMAP's projections, the Chicago area is expected to grow by more than 2 million people by 2040.<sup>xxi</sup>

Thirty years from now, CPS may see increased need for schools in neighborhoods that today are home to some of its most underutilized schools. This is not a certainty, and we don't believe the possibility should alter school actions this year. But given the possibility of long-term redevelopment exists, we suggest CPS consider the feasibility of retaining the title to all of its land. If repopulation occurs, CPS may need to increase capacity in neighborhoods where it is currently considering closures. And at that point, the District may find repurchasing land in these rediscovered and growing neighborhoods to be prohibitively expensive.

Other cities, including San Francisco, sold buildings and land decades ago, and have since struggled to find the funds to acquire space for additional schools as the cities have revitalized and populations grown.<sup>xxii</sup>

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## VII. Conclusion

Over the last four months, the Commission on School Utilization has heard from people from all parts of Chicago and all walks of life. We have been impressed with the passion so many feel for their schools. We know there are many talented leaders, dedicated teachers, supportive parents and families, and eager students in this city. We feel privileged to have had the chance to travel into communities, to meet so many people, and to hear their important stories, concerns, and hopes.

We have also consulted with education leaders both within Chicago and from around the country to learn how others have tried to grapple with the challenge of underutilization. We know that empty seats are expensive to maintain, rob funds that could be directed toward improving the facilities in which our students learn, and make it difficult to provide the education that our children have a right to expect and that we have a responsibility to provide.

We do not offer a list of schools to close. That list will – and should – come from the District. Instead, we offer a series of recommendations to shape not only the list, but also to ensure that all decisions are made with the goal of providing the best education possible for students.

In Phase I, we gave the District a list of nine recommendations:

1. Take high schools off the table
2. Don't close any Level 1 (high-performing) schools
3. Don't close underutilized schools that are in the process of adding grades
4. Don't close or consolidate underutilized schools with more than 600 students
5. Don't close underutilized schools that are close to efficient utilization
6. Don't close underutilized schools that have recently experienced a significant school action
7. Don't close underutilized Level 2 schools that are “on the rise”
8. Develop creative solutions to deal with the 61 elementary schools that are overcrowded
9. Hold charter-operated schools to the same standards to which District-run schools are held

In Phase II, we have followed with five additional recommendations:

1. **Only close schools where students can be transferred safely to better-performing schools.** Our analysis suggests that CPS has the capacity to consolidate approximately 80 schools.

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2. **Look beyond the utilization data to examine in detail all relevant factors** (e.g., annex space, students with disabilities and their needs, pre-Kindergarten classrooms, Head Start placements) when considering whether to close a school. In particular, pay close attention to the work done by communities. Wherever thoughtful community plans have been developed and vetted – for example, in Woodlawn, Humboldt Park, Englewood, Bronzeville, and a number of other communities around the city – those plans should weigh heavily in any decisions.
3. **Consider two options on pacing: all in one year or split over two years.** As soon as possible, CPS must lift the cloud of potential closures and get back to the work of investing in schools, curriculum, instruction, and students.
4. **Spend the money to do it right**, so that students are moved safely and as effectively as possible into better schools and so that receiving schools have the infrastructure they need for all students to succeed.
5. **Create community-based building committees to develop plans for vacated schools buildings** so that the facilities remain community assets rather than become eyesores, or worse.

We have included a long list of supports to help ensure that, as a result of consolidation, students are moved safely into better educational environments. We have noted that providing these supports and needed capital investments in receiving schools will be costly. We encourage CPS to invest the funds, but equally caution that no organization – including CPS – can include in its planning a solution for every possible contingency. That, however, should not preclude the District from action.

If CPS attempts anything on the scale that we've outlined, the entire city will need to be part of ensuring that the effort is a success. We encourage the District to get the business, non-profit, and philanthropic communities involved, not just with money, but with time, energy, and expertise to support the schools and the students.

What we hope results from our efforts, and the consolidation process to follow, is a district that is more efficient to run, that is able to target future investments more effectively, that is relieved of the year-to-year upheaval wrought by school closures, and, most important, that provides a better education to all students as a result of any actions that are taken. As we said at the start, moving children safely to better schools is the outcome toward which we hope our work will guide the District. Indeed, it is the only outcome that matters.

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## Appendix A: Commission Members

Frank M. Clark – Chair

*Retired chairman and CEO, ComEd*

Ald. Howard B. Brookins

*Alderman, 21<sup>st</sup> ward*

Earnest Gates

*Executive director, Near West Side Community Development Corporation*

Pastor John Hannah

*Senior pastor, New Life Covenant Church*

Terry Hillard

*Retired superintendent, Chicago Police Department*

Fausto E. Lopez

*Retired principal, Chicago Public Schools*

Hon. Iris Y. Martinez

*Illinois State Senator, 20<sup>th</sup> District*

Deberah Perkins

*Retired teacher, Chicago Public Schools*

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## Appendix C: Interviews

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## Appendix D: Endnotes

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